The Illusion of Choice and the Reality of Freedom

Why “I Could Have Done Otherwise” Was Never True

I was recently teaching *epiphenomenalism* — the view that conscious thoughts are simply the by-product of brain processes and therefore lack any causal influence — as the inevitable conclusion of certain forms of mind–body dualism. That naturally led us to a wider exploration of inevitability itself — not just in A-Level Philosophy, but in the way all our actions unfold.

The classic neuroscience experiments — from Libet’s work in the 1980s to the more recent studies by Soon and Haynes — seem to show that our brains begin preparing an action before we consciously “decide” to perform it. After walking them through the data, I framed a question.

“At some point,” I said, “you presumably made a decision that whatever you were doing was drawing to a close, and the next thing on your agenda was to attend another provocative and entertaining philosophy lesson. You gathered your belongings, wondered for a moment which classroom we use on Friday mornings, and then navigated the congested hallways — the sea of smaller people rushing about with more energy and noise than you would ever consider mustering. But what if the real impetus for all of that was already underway — already inevitable — before it even occurred to you that you were ‘deciding’ anything at all?””

That is essentially the epiphenomenalist thesis — that mental processes are nothing but a by-product of physical brain states, having no more causal influence than a feather in the breeze: moving, drifting, fluttering, but never directing the wind that carries it. My students can be hard to read sometimes — sixth-form inscrutability is practically an art form — but this question actually broke through that façade. A subtle shift in the room: concern, curiosity, a flicker of worry. The idea landed.

So I gave an analogy. I said, “Imagine you’re sitting in the passenger seat of a car with a fake steering wheel — the kind toddlers get.” You turn it confidently. You feel like you’re steering. But it’s not connected to anything. This is the principle of determinism: life is moving, the engine is running, and the road is unfolding beneath and around you, shaped by a universe of prior causes you didn’t choose — genetics, upbringing, biology, habit formation, evolution — and behind them all, the long, uninterrupted and necessary chain of cause and effect that began with the Big Bang. Every star that formed, every atom that combined, every ancestral life that survived contributed to the moment your hand reached for the door handle this morning. In that sense, the journey began long before you ever stepped onto the road.

They looked worried. We had been studying ‘other-mind’ scepticism — the idea that we can never truly know whether anyone else has a mind at all — and yet I could practically see their concerned thoughts hanging in the air: vivid, unmistakable, undeniably real. A philosopher might deny other minds; a teacher never could. So I offered them some reassurance: the liberating truth of compatibilism — that determinism is only troubling if you misunderstand what freedom really is.

Most people secretly believe in a magical kind of freedom: the idea that we could genuinely have done something different, that at every moment multiple futures stand before us like branching

paths. I don't mean to burst anyone's bubble, but we do not have that kind of freedom. We never have, and never will. Life is not a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, and the alternative paths we imagine are never meaningfully real.

Because the truth is this: if you could repeat any moment a million times, with the same history, emotions, brain chemistry, and causes, you would make the same choice every time. We don't usually think like this — until something goes wrong. Then we start rehearsing the "coulda-shoulda-woulda" scenarios, as though alternate timelines were waiting in the wings, ready to take the stage. They were not. You did the only thing it was possible for you to do, and the only thing you could ever have done.

And here is the beauty of compatibilism: you still acted with freedom. You still made the choice; nobody else made it for you. Who cares if there was nothing else you could have done? Freedom isn't about having magical alternatives — it's about your actions flowing from who you are. A cursory grasp of the conservation laws that govern the universe makes this plain: from the Big Bang onwards, nothing extra has ever slipped into the universe to alter its unfolding pattern — no new force or energy suddenly appearing to push events off course. The chain of cause and effect is uninterrupted, necessary, and complete — and no ghostly mind floats above it, derailing and redirecting events.

And this is why I call it liberation. In the very moment of your existence, you are free — utterly free — to act, to choose, to respond. Retrospectively, yes: take stock. Reflect. Learn what you can do better next time. But do not waste your life on self-blame, guilt, or regret. Those are just counterfactual daydreams. The past cannot be rewritten and could never have been otherwise. All it can be is a message to the present — an aspiration to do better.

This offers no solution to the dualist vs physicalist debate, largely because in their most refined forms the two positions become barely distinguishable. The point here is not to settle metaphysics but to speak to the living quality of the present moment. It reminds us where our attention should fall, even if we do not yet understand the full cause or nature of that attention.

Why Necessity Is All the Freedom We Need

I'm not claiming to have invented a new solution to the free will debate. Philosophers have been here before — most famously Baruch Spinoza. He argued something radical: freedom has nothing to do with escaping causation. Nothing breaks the chain of cause and effect — not the mind, not insight, not effort. Everything unfolds with the same inevitability as the movement of the planets.

In that picture, we are unfree only when we misunderstand the forces shaping us. We feel pushed around by life because we imagine ourselves separate from the causes acting upon us. But when you understand those causes — your habits, your emotions, your pressures — that understanding becomes part of the chain. It doesn't override necessity; it transforms it from within.

Freedom, then, is not stepping outside causation. It is causation becoming self-aware.

A similar insight appears in Buddhist thought, which teaches that everything arises from conditions — including intentions and decisions. There is no little pilot inside the head steering the flow from outside. There is only the flow itself, taking temporary form as "you." When you see that clearly, the feeling of being acted upon loosens its grip. You don't break the chain; you finally see your place in it.

Modern neuroscience points in the same direction. The brain is an unimaginably complex physical system, continually reshaping itself through learning and attention. We don't yet know what a "decision" is in physical terms — the science is still in its early chapters — but we do know this: insight literally rewires the brain. Clarity changes what comes next.

So three perspectives converge:

- **Spinoza**: understanding necessity *is* freedom
- **Buddhism**: insight dissolves the illusion of being pushed around
- **Neuroscience**: awareness becomes a physical cause

You are not free from causation;
you are free as causation — unfolding with increasing clarity.

This is a freedom that does not rely on supernatural exceptions or alternative timelines. It doesn't require a self hovering above the neurons. It is grounded in a simple and powerful truth: when you understand why you act as you do, that insight changes what you will do next.

The bell rang. They gathered their things and headed back into the corridors — the familiar tide of noise, motion, and momentum carrying everyone to their next destination. Nothing fundamental about the situation had changed. And yet, something about how they saw it might have.

Not passengers gripping a fake steering wheel — but participants in the real machinery of cause and effect. Part of the engine. Part of the motion.

Freedom wasn't floating somewhere outside the brain, waiting to intervene. It was right there in every step they took down the hallway — the clarity to understand what is happening, and to shape what comes next.

We cannot rewrite the past.
But in the moment of acting, the story is still alive.